

# Personalised Learning Pedagogies within Contemporary Schools

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## Abstract

Personalised learning is emerging as the way forward for global education in the changing environment of 21<sup>st</sup> century teaching and learning. This involves the transfer of learning focus from teacher directed toward a more individualised approach, one that places learner needs, abilities, motivations, and desires in the forefront. Research suggests that the common in practice themes of a personalised approach are authentic assessment for learning, a flexible curriculum that is learner centred, the involvement of the community in learning, and the use of information communication technology (ICT) to provide multiple resources and learning platforms. The challenges that exist with this approach are the level of teacher buy in, student unfamiliarity with its processes, and lack of Government support and guidance for schools. This review focuses on case studies as well as primary and secondary research, relating to these common themes and challenges and identifies necessary personalised aspects and exemplars for future implementers.

**Keywords:** *Personalised Learning, Assessment for Learning, Curriculum Flexibility, Community Involvement, ICT, Learning Platforms, Learner Centred, Learner Profiles, Learner Voice, Learner Choice.*



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## Introduction

According to Patrick, Kennedy, and Powell (2013), personalised learning is defined as “tailoring learning for each student’s strengths, needs and interests - including enabling student voice and choice in what, how, when and where they learn - to provide flexibility and supports to ensure mastery of the highest standards possible” (cited in Taylor, 2016, p. 3). This requires instructional models that provide opportunities for the mastery of specific learning competencies, attempted at a student-centred pace, with the support of facilitated assessment that allows for individualised instruction (Taylor, 2016). Although extensive research leans toward multiple interpretations and definitions of personalised learning in theory, the one common element is that personalised learning is learning that is catered to the needs of the individual. But what does this mean in the context of classroom practice? How are schools incorporating student voice and choice, while tailoring for the specific learning needs of a multitude of diverse students? The focus of this literature review is on research pertaining to the common features and challenges that are evident within contemporary primary, middle, and secondary schools that have broken away from traditional learning environments in favour of a more personalised approach. Through researching qualitative data from New Zealand, Australian, English, and American case studies, along with primary and secondary research material, four common features

of an implemented personalised learning approach are emerging. These are:

- The use of authentic assessment for learning, and the knowledge of student needs
- A flexible curriculum that allows for student voice and choice
- The involvement of family and communities in the teaching and learning process
- The use of information communication technology (ICT) for learning and the collection of student data

Along with these features are challenges identified in the research, including: the level of *kaiako* (teacher) buy in through resistance to pedagogical change, the challenges for *ākonga* (learner) adjusting to a personalised approach, and, on a New Zealand front, a lack of Government support and guidance for school principals. Although this is not an exhaustive review of current literature, nor a review on best practice evidence, it does provide useful information for potential implementers.

## Assessment

### *Creating Learner Profiles*

One of the common features of implemented personalised learning approaches to come out of the researched material is the



value that is placed on identifying the learning interests and characteristics of individual *ākonga* that enables adequate assessment for learning. According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), one of the key components of personalised learning is the use of assessment for learning that is based on “detailed knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of individual students” (OECD, 2006, p. 10). In a case study of one United States of America and one Canadian high school, [Jenkins and Keefe \(2002\)](#) found that the diagnosis of *ākonga* learning characteristics are at the heart of the personalised learning approach. Both schools develop personalised educational plans with all their *ākonga*, which allows for Learner Style Profiles (LSP), and these are then used as an instrument to help *ākonga* choose relevant activities from learning guides and appropriate learning environments that have been identified in their profiles ([Jenkins & Keefe, 2002](#)). The *kaiako* then use this information, along with past achievement data and developmental information, to generate personal plan books for each *ākonga* that are monitored by *kaiako* for time spent on curriculum areas and progress evaluation. The *kaiako* themselves collaborate across curriculum areas and departments through linkable databases that detail *ākonga* profiles and progress reports that allows for the meeting of *ākonga* learning objectives and goals in accordance with their learning styles and developmental needs ([Jenkins & Keefe, 2002](#)). A similar study was conducted in Australia on four Year 7 – 10 regional schools in the state of Victoria that implemented personalised learning focuses ([Prain et al., 2013](#)). In one school, *kaiako* from the mathematics department obtained *ākonga* data from surveys, *ākonga* interviews, and national tests results to gain a precise snapshot of *ākonga* achievement, motivation, learning needs, and desires. This information was then used for collaborative consultancy by all members of the mathematics department to establish a pedagogy that would be relevant for the learning needs of the researched *ākonga* ([Prain et al., 2013](#)). Although not identical, these methods are valuable tools for vital *ākonga* information that can be analysed, for authentic assessment for learning to be incorporated.

#### *Authentic Assessment for learning*

Throughout the researched material, authentic assessment for learning is utilised to further the learning abilities of *ākonga*. The OECD describe assessment for learning as assessment that “help[s] learners’ work out how effective their learning was ... allow[ing] students to adjust and adapt their learning strategies” (OECD, 2006, p. 111), while also providing pivotal information for *kaiako* to base learning activities on. [Taylor \(2016\)](#), as part of a paper for her doctoral dissertation, conducted case study analysis of American middle school teachers’ experiences of personalisation. For one school *kaiako*, assessment for learning was used to gauge *ākonga* abilities at the start of the year through a “diagnostic assessment” of specific standards that are covered throughout the year ([Taylor, 2016, p. 150](#)). This assessment allows *ākonga* to recognise their unique strengths and weaknesses, so that they can understand and identify what they need to focus their learning on. From that information, *ākonga* knowledge is assessed, and lessons are adjusted accordingly through a variety of instructional methods, including teacher-led, text and writing based, and hands-on activities ([Taylor, 2016](#)). Assessment for learning is also within the schools [Jenkins and](#)

[Keefe \(2002\)](#) used for their case studies. In one high school, each student is assigned a *kaiako* that regularly meets with them to provide feedback on test results and completed learning activities. Students take tests when they feel they are ready, with no set schedule to compete against. Learning takes precedence over grades, as *kaiako* give one on one feedback, while allowing the redoing of their work until it is satisfactory to receive a *pass* grade ([Jenkins & Keefe, 2002](#)). Providing authentic assessment for learning is at the core of personalised learning, but, for individual progress to be achieved, special accommodations and adjustments to curriculum offerings are to be enacted.

## Curriculum

#### *Learner voice and choice*

At the heart of a personalised learning pedagogy is the amount of *ākonga* voice and choice that is evident within the proposed school wide curriculum. Parsons & Beauchamp (2012) in their report suggest that for student-centred learning to be produced, providing curriculum choice for *ākonga* is vital, so that opportunities to “build on individual strengths and achievements, pursue ... passions and interests, and learn in ways consistent with their individual learning styles” are enabled (2012, p. 230). From a New Zealand primary school perspective; regarding the provision of learner choice and voice in the curriculum, [Howard \(2016\)](#) investigated numerous schools around the country to identify three common themes surrounding personalised learning; learners at the centre, information and communications technology and communities of Collaboration.. Within the theme of “learners at the centre” she identified the need for “a highly-structured approach that places the needs, interests and learning styles of students at the centre” ([Howard, 2016, p. 9](#)). She also found that within the case study schools, *ākonga* developed self-managing skills that allowed for individual choice for what they wanted to work on, and when this would happen. They chose the context in which they were to learn the skills that were being focused on, and could choose how they presented their completed work.

Another qualitative study by Gilmore (2015) also investigated the use of personalised learning in various primary schools around New Zealand, as well as in Scotland. Her findings on learner voice and choice within the curriculum were that some of the researched schools collected learner voice to start each of their annual planning goals, while others enabled learner choice within an inquiry approach that allowed for *ākonga* to focus on developmental skill sets (Gilmore, 2015, p. 12). Other common elements within the visited schools were the use of *must do* and *can do* activities for *ākonga*, visible learning goals that *ākonga* were able to self-select from, and a clear vision for both *kaiako* and *ākonga* on what learning entailed (Gilmore, 2015, p. 12). In addition to providing learner voice and choice in personalised curriculum development, another common researched theme is the flexible use of such curriculum.

#### *Curriculum Flexibility*

Evidence from researched material sheds light on the agreement that educators have toward the need for flexible personalised curriculum. Bolstad et al. (2012), in a report to the New Zealand Ministry of Education, identifies a method for providing curriculum flexibility through supporting *ākonga*

interests and needs, while offering opportunities to work toward goals for their lives after schooling. They report on a case study of an Auckland high school that applies this method, of which they metaphorically term the *Networked Campground* that has, as its premise, a goal to develop individual strengths, while placing an emphasis on basic literacy and numeracy skills through systems that allow for personalised pathways for learning (2012, p. 23).

For the school in the Bolstad et al. (2012) case study, the curriculum is used to build strong relationships with *ākonga*, to ensure that *ākonga* choose personally relevant and engaging pathways through their secondary years. Support for learning is the primary focus, and is evident in the time table structures that include one day of the week in which personally chosen *impact studies* are worked on by *ākonga*, with the other four days broken up into one hundred-minute episodes for *specialist subject studies*. Within these hundred-minute blocks, two are devoted to *ākonga* and *kaiako* mentoring time, and this also allows for space to manoeuvre the curriculum to support their learning needs.

A further case study by [Sebba, Brown, Steward, Galton, and James \(2007\)](#) that investigated 13 English middle schools echoes the use of timetabling to create a flexible curriculum. The schools that were investigated used both collaborative and cross-curricular methods to teach *ākonga*, by providing *time off* blocks of timetabling in which real world and relevant *open-ended learning challenges* are administered ([Sebba et al., 2007](#)). This has allowed for both *ākonga* and *kaiako* to monitor their individual strengths and needs, and develop these toward enhanced outcomes, which, for one teacher, includes providing accessible and relevant activities that are “more in tune with [student current and] future lifestyles and working lives” ([Sebba et al., 2007, p. 25-26](#)). This focus on the lives of *ākonga* also involves another emerging common thread in personalised learning approaches that have been researched; the involvement of communities in its implementation.

## Community

The OECD (2006) state that “partnership and support beyond the classroom play[s] a crucial role in the [implementation] of personalisation ... Home-school partnerships, mentoring to work-based learning, [and] a range of community resources act as powerful supports for educational attainment” (OECD, 2006, p. 123). A research project by Bevan-Brown, McGee, Ward, and MacIntyre (2011) on personalised learning approaches within New Zealand schools found that all schools using this approach were also in partnership with strong and engaged communities (Bevan-Brown et al., 2011). The schools investigated were organising ethnic and community support groups with regular gatherings and involving church and business groups, inviting parents to be involved with their child’s learning and assessment through *kaiako-ākonga-whānau* conferencing, engaging with community leaders in school events and programmes, as well as regular *whānau* (family) contact through newsletters, blogs, and an open-door policy (Bevan-Brown et al., 2011). Similar community involvement was found in a principal’s research sabbatical report by Wilson (2008). He describes how the *ākonga* in his school look to the community for expert knowledge to interview, interact with, and visit, and how the community is involved through information evenings for parents, surveys, open

nights, parent interviews, and individual *ākonga* portfolios that are sent home to *whānau* (Wilson, 2008, pg. 13). One of the cases discussed in their report (Bolstad et al., 2012) identifies an area school in New Zealand that has developed an inclusive, collaborative partnership approach that involves *ākonga*, *kaiako*, and the wider community. They describe how the school provides two days a week break from the set curriculum, whereby year 1 – 13 *ākonga* focus on topics and tailored learning programmes that lead them into the community and surrounding areas, using connections with local businesses and employers for career opportunities. Through primary research, gaining vital skills for these future career opportunities has divulged another common feature of implemented personalised learning; the use of ICT in the classroom.

## Information and Communications Technology

[Wolf \(2010\)](#), in a symposium report on ICT use in the classroom, advocates for the use of technology by stating that without it, personalised learning cannot eventuate “at scale” (2010, p. 6). Her report argues that technology enables the tracking and managing of the learning needs of *ākonga*, provides a platform for access to a multitude of engaging learning activities, and enables opportunities to meet student needs “everywhere at any time, but which are not all available within the four walls of the traditional classroom” ([Wolf, 2010, p. 6](#)). The report describes a case study high school in the United States of America that tracks and manages its *ākonga* through its use of a Big Picture model of learning that requires *ākonga* to plan a personalised programme of learning with their families that allows two days a week for internships in the community ([Wolf, 2010](#)). The report describes the benefits for, and the increased engagement levels from students within the programme through the focus placed on “communications, empirical research, personal qualities, quantitative research, and social reasoning,” allowing for a personalised learning experience beyond the school, emphasising that learning should not and does not just happen within the school day ([Wolf, 2010, p. 4](#)).

A case study by [Jewitt, Clark, and Hadjithoma-Garstka \(2011\)](#) on the use and potential of ICT based learning platforms in 12 English primary and secondary schools, reports on the success of the use of learning platforms to provide *ākonga* with activities that supplement and support their individual learning needs ([Jewitt et al., 2011](#)). *Kaiako* set individual activities on *ākonga* platforms, used blogs and discussion forums to track *ākonga* engagement and progress, and uploaded individualised homework tasks that *ākonga* work through at their own pace ([Jewitt et al., 2011](#)). The focus of these platforms is to increase *ākonga* opportunities for “independent and personalised learning, [whereby] all pupils are able to progress, achieve, and participate in different ways and at their own pace” ([Jewitt et al., 2011, p. 343](#)).

## Challenges

Data from the mainly qualitative research that has been undertaken in this review has also exposed challenges that schools and *ākonga* experience while implementing personalised learning. [Tolmie \(2016\)](#), in her Master’s thesis on the



implementation of personalised innovative learning environments in three Auckland primary schools, identified that a lack of buy in from *kaiako*, through resistance to change, provided evident challenges for researched schools (Tolmie, 2016). Tolmie (2016) noted that due to the multiple levels of communication and collaboration required between multiple *kaiako*, *kaiako* resisted the pedagogical adjustments that personalised learning requires. For some *kaiako*, “taking the leap to teach collaboratively was ... scary and one of the biggest initial challenges” to implementation (Tolmie, 2016, p. 72). Tolmie (2016) also identified challenges that *ākonga* faced in an innovative learning environments. These occurred when *ākonga*, who had come from more traditional schools, became overwhelmed at the distinct change in pedagogy that personalisation involved (Tolmie, 2016). Other challenges were through *ākonga* choosing easy activity options that did not extend their abilities. *Kaiako* countered this by providing work sheets that contained *must do* and *can do* activities to ensure progress and development (Tolmie, 2016). Hargreaves (2010), in a Master’s thesis on the perspectives of four New Zealand principals that incorporated personalised learning in their schools, found that a lack of support and direction from the Ministry of Education was a major implementational challenge (Hargreaves, 2010, p. 90). Many of the principals reported that a lack of information about the “desired direction for New Zealand education” from the Ministry of Education had left them in the dark about what future focused goals were needed to move their schools forward, and they stressed that guidance from the Government would “assist principals in developing the research foundations for future [curriculum] decisions” (Hargreaves, 2010, p. 91).

## Conclusion

This literature review has focused on the common features and challenges that are evident from case studies and primary and secondary research materials on the implementation of personalised learning within New Zealand, English, and American, primary, middle, and high schools. Four emerging common themes: the authentic assessment for learning, a flexible curriculum, community involvement, and the use of ICT have been identified as necessary for personalised learning to exist. These themes put the learner at the centre of learning that enables individualised pathways and opportunities for *ākonga* to choose the pace and activities that are best suited for their own learning strengths and needs. For these to be relevant for individual *ākonga*, *kaiako* need to provide suitable assessments for learning and obtain a multitude of data that enables systems and learning platforms that are best suited for *ākonga* progress and development. As research has suggested there are challenges to implementing personalised learning. This is through *kaiako* being hesitant or uncomfortable with changing their pedagogical practice, *ākonga* being unfamiliar with a personalised approach, and a seemingly lack of direction and guidance from Government departments. The limitations to this review are that although there are a large number of theoretical approaches and definitions of personalised learning, there exists a lack of case studies that specifically deal with the implementation processes. Another limitation is that, of the case studies researched, a majority deal with a small cross-section of schools. This hinders the ability for

this researcher to assess the commonalities on a broader scale. Further case study research on implemented personalised learning practices is needed to enable a more synthesised analysis of best practice approaches.

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